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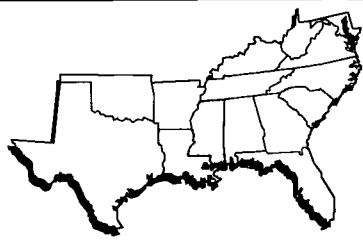
ABSTRACT

In the 1990s, accountability initiatives emphasize local problem solving and decision making. This report describes recent efforts in Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) states to increase local accountability for student learning, with emphasis on the "reward-and-sanction" programs that some states are including in their education accountability systems. This guidebook describes how SREB states are measuring and reporting progress and identifies the rewards offered for student achievement. Seven states (Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas) provide financial rewards for raising student achievement. A detailed matrix depicts features of accountability programs in the SREB states of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. The guidebook also describes early outcomes of sanctions and assistance programs. It is recommended that educators and state leaders: (1) get tests and assessments right; (2) balance action with planning and evaluation; (3) make sure that programs are easy to understand; (4) provide help for educators to change; and (5) create a comprehensive accountability program. (LMI)

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1997

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Accountability in the 1990s: Holding Schools Responsible for Student Achievement

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Southern Regional Education Board

Featuring a
state-by-state table
of accountability
programs

FA028-304

GOALS FOR EDUCATION

BY THE YEAR 2000 —

All states and localities will have schools with improved performance and productivity demonstrated by results.

*SREB Goals for Education
Commission for Educational Quality, 1988*

If you want more money for schools, we must have more accountability for results. . . . This message has echoed throughout schoolhouses and statehouses across the South in this decade. Accountability has become *the* “A” word in education’s “ABCs.”

One legislative leader explains it this way: “We knew that if we were going to vote for a half-cent sales tax increase and put this money into education, we needed something to show the taxpayers the value of the dollars that were being spent.” In every SREB state, that “something” has been a higher standard of accountability than ever before.

In most states, leaders moved responsibility for student progress closer to the classroom and balanced tougher state standards with more local decision making. With a stroke of the governor’s pen, many states stripped away the most restrictive rules and regulations that local educators said were road blocks to their efforts to improve schools.

Ironically, this new flexibility for districts and schools has not always been welcomed by local school boards, administrators and teachers. Many educators found themselves reluctant to shed the comfortable defense of “the state won’t let us do that.” But as the shift continues to more local responsibility for student achievement, the “culture” of schools is beginning to change.

In 1988, when SREB asked state and regional leaders to establish educational goals for the year 2000, they had this to say about accountability: “All states and localities will have schools with improved performance and productivity as demonstrated by results.”

Every year since 1988, SREB has worked with states on this goal. SREB conferences and reports give legislators, their staff and education staff ways to share each state’s experiences with education accountability, including the specifics of what they are learning about the right balance between state goals and local control.

This report describes recent efforts in the SREB states to increase local accountability for student learning, with particular emphasis on the “reward-and-sanction” programs some states are including in their education accountability systems.

Mark Musick, President
Southern Regional Education Board

Accountability in the 1990s: Holding Schools Responsible for Student Achievement

"We knew that we had to raise revenue for education and that meant raising taxes. To ask people to do that, we had to have an accountability system."

State legislator

"Business leaders had taken a very strong position that schools needed to be held accountable and at very high standards."

State legislator

"You have to be able to explain it—if you want the legislature to buy it."

Legislative staff

Accountability is center stage

Accountability is not a new idea in education—but it has moved to center stage in the 1990s. Today's approaches to accountability build on 20 years of trial and error, as states searched for the best policies to promote and ensure student success.

When the 1970s began, accountability in education focused more on whether there was enough classroom space and teachers, and whether textbooks were current. If a "reasonable" number of high school graduates were going to college, the general view was that education was in "good enough" shape. If we paid attention to what we put into education, quality would take care of itself. The shortcomings of this "inputs" approach to accountability are apparent today. Many schools have enough space, enough teachers, current textbooks (and even Internet access), and they are sending most graduates to college and are fully accredited. But their students often do not meet reasonable expectations of achievement.

Leaders in the SREB states began to expand their thinking about educational accountability in the 1980s as they shifted some of their attention to the skills and knowledge of teachers and principals. As reports from SREB and others monitoring education began to document the poor preparation of many teachers, states looked for ways to raise the standards for teaching. Most states revamped their licensure laws and began to require new teachers to pass examinations, although passing marks in most states were set at minimal levels (and remain there today). States also developed better evaluations for both new and veteran teachers and principals, although few states provided the funds for professional development necessary to make the evaluations meaningful.

States also experimented with incentive pay programs during the 1980s to encourage excellence in teaching. The plans that ultimately emerged rewarded teachers for longevity or extra work—not student success—

This report was prepared by Lynn M. Cornett, Vice President for State Services, and by Gale F. Gaines, Associate Director for State Services. An earlier report, *Linking Education Report Cards and Local School Improvement*, focused on the effectiveness of state school-by-school reporting requirements.

and most were underfunded and eventually abandoned. Tennessee is the SREB exception in that its program is still in operation and fully funded.

For the most part, the failure of early incentive programs can be traced to political and legal difficulties and the lack of will to spend the time and money required to give

these programs an opportunity to work. While many state plans originally called for student achievement to play a role in the evaluation of teachers, no SREB state ever made a full-fledged effort to do so. (The best example of a state program that linked student achievement and teacher evaluation is the Arizona Career Ladder Plan which began in the 1980s and is still in place today.)

What's different about school accountability in the 1990s?

Dissatisfied with the modest improvements in education indicators in the 1980s, and influenced perhaps by the “quality” and “standards” movements in business and industry, leaders in the SREB states began to rethink their approaches to school accountability and performance in the 1990s.

A new policy message began to emerge, reflecting an era of tighter state budgets, less tolerance for bureaucratic controls, and greater emphasis on front-line authority and responsibility. *You are responsible for improved student learning*, policymakers told educators. *Here is the standard of progress you must achieve and here is the flexibility you need to get there.*

SREB states have led the nation in developing comprehensive school reform laws that carry this message to schools and classrooms. Most often, these programs link new academic standards with tests and assessments that provide educators, policy makers and the public with more detailed information about what students are learning. Many include rewards and sanctions for schools, and most require school-by-school reporting to parents and the public.

Some states have revamped the incentive plans of the 1980s to fit better into a team

approach to accountability. These programs focus on *school* improvement and reward entire schools when students reach achievement benchmarks. When students in a school fail to meet certain benchmarks most programs threaten sanctions. *When children can't read or do mathematics*, the message goes, *teachers and administrators will be held accountable*. Targeted schools are often given extra resources and professional assistance—but many states reserve the right to take over failing schools, to fire staff, and even to close the schools' doors.

What is different about 1990s-style accountability is the emphasis on local problem solving and decision making. Many states have backed away from the prescriptive rules and regulations of decades past. Now leaders are waiting to see how well local educators respond. Early studies suggest that many schools and school systems are finding the transition difficult. Higher academic standards may require significant changes in the school curriculum, in the ways teachers teach, and in professional development. The pressure to change is likely to build resentment toward the new systems of accountability, and some states are likely to feel some political “heat” to return to some of the ways of the 1970s and 1980s.

How are states measuring and reporting progress?

"Our system challenges schools to always improve from where they were last time. We are asking schools to continue to improve."

Legislative staff

"What we expect students to know and be able to do is clearer now to everyone."

State department of education staff

In determining schools to receive rewards or sanctions, states are using two approaches to accountability—sometimes mixing the two. Some states require schools to meet an absolute goal or benchmark; others emphasize progress, or gains in student achievement over time.

Most states use gains on achievement to determine sanctions and rewards. States like Texas and North Carolina compare one year's expected growth in student achievement to actual growth. Other states (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Kentucky, Maryland and Tennessee) measure change in student achievement

over two- or three-year cycles. In addition, Tennessee schools must meet certain drop-out and attendance standards or be placed on probation, and probation can lead to removing a school board or superintendent or to reassigning staff.

Alabama and Oklahoma use percentile rankings on standardized tests to set minimum goals for schools. In Oklahoma, average test scores in the bottom 25 percent of the state over a three-year period target a school as "high challenge." This means schools develop improvement plans and that faculty can be reassigned.

Achievement categories play a key role

Some states are using achievement categories to indicate how well schools are doing compared to a set of criteria. Their names vary: In Texas, schools are rated as *exemplary*, *recognized*, *acceptable* or *low performing*. Alabama uses *academic clear*, *academic caution* and *academic alert*. Kentucky's plan has five categories: *rewards*, *successful*, *not meeting threshold*, *in decline*, and *in crisis*. Most states use student achievement scores as the primary measure to determine how well schools are doing. The tests states use for these student achievement results are ones they develop or ones they purchase from commercial testing companies.

A few states are changing their testing programs to reflect a greater emphasis on accountability, high standards and long-term achievement goals. This change rarely, if ever, occurs without controversy and confusion. Parents and educators are accustomed to seeing student achievement reported in relation to "the national average" established for commercial, norm-referenced tests. States like Kentucky, which uses achievement levels to report on student progress (e.g., novice, apprentice, proficient, advanced), must convince the public that the new reporting system is credible and understandable. The problem is compounded when results on the new, more challenging state tests reveal, for

Linking tests and standards

Most states that are redesigning testing and assessment programs have also developed more rigorous academic standards. Testmakers rely on these standards to develop test items that accurately reflect the expectations being set for students and schools.

This shift in focus to higher standards is apparent in actions taken in several SREB states. Kentucky developed new expectations and assessments for all grades. Maryland first developed new tests for elementary students and is now preparing end-of-course tests for secondary schools. Texas currently relies on existing tests but is developing new ones with higher standards. Florida also built its accountability program around existing testing, but the legislature has appropriated funds to develop a new assessment program scheduled for 1999 implementation.

example, that while 60 percent of the state's students were "above the national average" on the old test, the new test finds that only only one-third are "proficient."

While one legislator acknowledges the difficulty in helping the public make the transition, he believes the effort is worthwhile. "It's the difference between realism and perception," he says. "I think we have a much more realistic system now."

A critical part of the accountability package is being able to report results for every public school. Every SREB state has school district reports and all except Arkansas are

releasing school-by-school results. Alabama is currently re-designing its school-level reports. Tennessee legislation also requires every district to report how new money is spent. District or school report cards in Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas and West Virginia show how funds are spent for instruction and administration.

"Our accountability system is dealing with student achievement and the pressure is on for school improvement. We have the advantage of already having school and district report cards."

State legislator

At a Glance

Accountability Programs in SREB States

	Financial Rewards	Sanctions/ Intervention	School-by-School Report Cards
Alabama	—	districts, schools	under development
Arkansas	—	districts	no
Florida	districts encouraged to develop	districts, schools	yes
Georgia	schools	—	yes
Kentucky	districts, schools	districts, schools	yes
Louisiana	under development	under development	yes
Maryland	schools	schools	yes
Mississippi	—	districts	yes
North Carolina	schools	districts, schools	yes
Oklahoma	—	schools	yes
South Carolina	schools	districts	yes
Tennessee	schools	districts, schools	yes
Texas	principals ¹	districts, schools	yes
Virginia	—	—	yes
West Virginia	—	districts, schools	yes

¹ May be revised to a school incentive program by the 1997 legislature.

Rewards for student achievement

"You can't earn rewards by simply staying as good as you were or improving slightly, you have to make significant gains to earn a reward."

State department of education staff

"You would think that by giving millions of dollars in rewards to schools we'd do nothing but make friends in those schools, but school staff became divided over what to do with their school's share of the money. This happened in only a handful of cases, but it is an issue you hear time and again."

State department of education staff

Seven SREB states (Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Texas) provide financial rewards for raising student achievement. In addition, Florida encourages districts and schools to reward progress, but state funds are not available. SREB states also have programs to provide non-financial awards, such as public recognition. Some states work with the U.S. Department of Education's *Blue Ribbon Schools* program to recognize excellence.

With the exception of Texas, states that offer rewards provide these incentives to schools and teachers. In 1995, Texas law created and funded a program to reward principals. The program has not been implemented, and it is likely that an earlier school

incentive program in Texas will be funded in place of the principal program. All school incentive programs except Georgia's set the criteria for receiving rewards at the state level. In Georgia, schools use state guidelines to set their own objectives.

The programs in Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina and Tennessee all provide reward money to the school and allow school personnel to decide how the money will be distributed. Kentucky also sets goals for school districts and allows central office staffs to share in the rewards program. Laws in Maryland and South Carolina forbid using reward money for individual bonuses; in those states, school staffs jointly decide how to spend the money on school improvement.

Rewards vary widely from state to state

The numbers of schools qualifying for rewards and the amounts they receive vary widely from state to state. In 1995, 38 percent of Kentucky's schools earned rewards. In 1997, 41 percent of Kentucky's schools will receive awards for improvement from 1994 to 1996. In contrast, five percent of Tennessee's schools earned rewards in 1996. In Georgia, where schools must apply to the rewards

program, only 67 of 3000 schools completed their applications in 1994—10 received awards. In 1996, 29 schools (one percent) received awards.

Funding ranges from \$500,000 in Tennessee to an anticipated \$28 million in North Carolina. The first awards given in Tennessee provided \$4,400 to each qualifying school. In 1995 over 14,000 teachers (about 37 percent)

in Kentucky received bonuses of \$1,300 to \$2,600 per person depending on how high the performance gains were and how the money was distributed in the school. In the 1996 school year, certified staff in Georgia schools who met performance criteria received \$2,000 each, with total awards of \$3.3 million. The \$28 million available for the first year of rewards in North Carolina is expected to provide from \$500 to \$1,000 per certified staff.

South Carolina schools qualifying for awards in 1996-97 received between \$2,800 and \$68,400, based on \$26 per student. Maryland is providing \$2.75 million in 1996-97; 102 elementary and middle schools have won awards of \$14,600 to \$51,400. In Texas, funding could provide a maximum of \$5,000 per principal for gains in school performance, but no money has been awarded to date.

Most of the reward programs, with the exception of the South Carolina school incentive program, have been in place only a few years. Early teacher response to the reward programs is perhaps best-documented in Kentucky—and is reminiscent of reactions by teachers to the incentive programs of the 1980s (documented in the SREB *Career Ladder Clearinghouse* reports, 1984-1994.)

A study of Kentucky's reward system by the University of Kentucky Institute on Education Reform¹ documented a marked difference in teaching philosophies between teachers who received awards and those who did not. Teachers who received rewards were more likely to believe that they could influence student learning. Those who did not receive rewards were more likely to blame factors outside of school for student failure. Teachers at schools not receiving awards were also more likely to feel that schools cheat to get rewards and that necessary resources were not available at their school to implement the complete reform package. The study showed that only small percentages of teachers thought awards or sanctions were distributed fairly (16 percent of reward and 3 percent of non-reward teachers).

Do rewards work? Some legislators believe that reward programs have not had as much impact on school improvement as have threats of sanctions. Others agree with the legislator who says that "If we fully fund a rewards program, and if it is fair and teachers think it's fair, then it can be more important than the sanctions. Our problem is getting enough money for rewards."

1 *The Relationship Between Kentucky's Reward System and Teachers' Attitudes Towards Teaching, Learning, and Reform*, by Peter Winograd, Eric Anderman and Traci Bliss, University of Kentucky, January 1996.

Accountability Programs in the SREB States

Financial Rewards	Sanctions/Assistance	Criteria	Trigger for Rewards and/or Sanctions	How Many Received Financial Rewards	How Many Received Sanctions	Total Funding
Alabama						
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Districts, schools State School Accountability Plan Legislation (1995) established academic and fiscal accountability with reporting to the public. Schools are identified for low academic performance or fiscal problems. Schools and districts under alert conduct a self study and develop an improvement plan. Assistance is provided. State board of education can require the state superintendent of education to intervene and manage a school if improvement does not occur. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Three-year cycle State approved norm-referenced testing in grades 3-11 Districts must be fiscally accountable including annual budgets and financial statements. 	<p>Sanctions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> School and district ratings for academics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Academic clear:</i> Majority of students scoring at the 40th percentile <i>Academic caution:</i> Majority of students scoring between 23rd and 39th percentile; if improvement doesn't occur in two years, the school is placed on academic alert. <i>Academic alert:</i> Majority of students scoring at or below 22nd percentile State superintendent of education intervenes after three years of no improvement. 		<p>June 1996</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Fiscal problems:</i> Three school districts <i>Academic clear:</i> 945 schools 74 districts <i>Academic caution:</i> 280 schools 23 districts <i>Academic alert:</i> 24 out of 1250 schools; no districts 	
Arkansas						
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Districts <i>Academic & Fiscal Distress Plan</i> A 1995 law designed to target and help local districts that are in fiscal distress or whose students aren't performing at desired academic levels. Department of education developed indicators of fiscal and academic distress. Assistance to districts is to be coordinated by the department of education. Districts that do not make improvement (academic or fiscal) are subject to state takeover with possible removal of superintendent and local board, or it can be determined that a district be annexed by another district upon the decision of the state board of education. Target districts develop improvement plans approved by the department of education (Phase I). Failure to make improvement or submit a plan moves a district to Phase II that includes a team for on-site assistance. Districts that fail to show progress after the second year of probation may be taken over. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Three-year cycle Fiscal distress is when a declining balance will impact services to students. Academic distress indicators for targeting districts include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> State-approved, norm-referenced tests in grades 5, 7 and 9 in 1996-97 Completion rates for grades 9-12 Percent of classes taught by non-certified teachers Attendance rates Percent of students in core subjects Achievement disparity based on gender or race. 	<p>Sanctions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Districts with 40 percent of students at or below 25th percentile on state-approved norm-referenced tests are placed in Phase I. For 1996-97, 1) a district with 50 percent or more of students at or below 25th percentile or a district with more than 39 percent, or 2) less than 50 percent of students performing at or below 25th percentile and that have four of the following five indicators below the state average: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Completion rate in grades 9-12 Percentage of classes taught by fully certified teachers (three-year average) Percentage of students enrolled in core subjects in high school Attendance rate Achievement disparity based on gender or race is greater than state averages. 		<p>June 1996</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thirteen of 311 districts were identified for Phase I Seven districts were identified for financial distress. 	

Financial Rewards	Sanctions/Assistance	Criteria	Trigger for Rewards and/or Sanctions	How Many Received Financial Rewards	How Many Received Sanctions	Total Funding
Florida						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Districts, schools Florida's System of School Improvement and Accountability law (1991) defines goals and new state standards. Districts and schools are encouraged to develop awards and recognition that may include financial rewards. The department of education is working on reward criteria and will request funding from legislature for awards to successful schools. Successful Title 1 programs are rewarded now (Title 1 funds). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Districts, schools (1996 law) Schools can self-report that adequate progress (by local definitions) on school improvement plans is not being made, and assistance is provided by the department of education. Districts and schools designated as critically low performing by state board criteria are provided technical assistance by the department. Recommendations are made to the principal, local school board and superintendent. Assistance (three years) is provided to schools by the department of education and the district. If progress is not made after three years, the state board may call for actions such as changing staff at the school, reorganizing the school, redirecting additional resources or allowing parents to choose a different school. The state board acts on the recommendations of the Commissioner of Education. 	<p>Two methods for determining adequate progress:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Schools fall below state criteria for two consecutive years; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> High School <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Competency test in communications and mathematics (grade 11) Writing test (grade 10) Middle/Junior High School <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Norm-referenced tests in reading comprehension, mathematics concepts/application; writing (grade 8) Elementary School <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Norm-referenced tests in reading comprehension and mathematics concepts/application; writing (grade 4) <p>Currently districts choose norm-referenced tests used in grades 4, 8 and 10. A newly developed state test series will be used in three grades by 1998-99.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> By self report, schools not making adequate progress on their school improvement plans (local definition). 	<p>Intervention when:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Critically low performance on state criteria for two most current years: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> High School High School Competency Test (for graduation) for two consecutive years (first attempt) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communications less than 85 percent passing Mathematics less than 80 percent passing Writing test in grade 10 less than 67 percent scoring 3 or above Middle/Junior High School District-chosen, norm-referenced tests: Less than 40 percent of students scoring above 50th percentile on reading and mathematics and fewer than 50 percent score 3 or above on grade 8 writing test Elementary School District-chosen, norm-referenced tests: Less than 33 percent of students scoring above 50th percentile on reading and mathematics and less than 33 percent scoring 3 or above on grade 4 writing test By self report; schools not making adequate progress (by local definition) on their school improvement plans. 		<p>1995-96:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Approximately 5 percent of schools have critically low student performance. No sanctions yet. 	

Compiled by the Southern Regional Education Board, December 1996

Accountability Programs (cont'd)

Financial Rewards	Sanctions/Assistance	Criteria	Trigger for Rewards and/or Sanctions	How Many Received Financial Rewards	How Many Received Sanctions	Total Funding
Georgia						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools Georgia's <i>Pay for Performance</i> program (1992 law) provides funding bonuses to schools that meet performance objectives. Schools set objectives that are approved by the department of education. Objectives must include a significant portion of students in a school. Applications are voluntary and are approved by a panel of educators. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools If schools don't meet goals but are improving, they must do an improvement plan on how to meet goals in two years. If growth goals are not met in four years, then sanctions are imposed. If a school falls below the baseline, then it's a school <i>in decline</i>. Schools <i>in decline</i> are helped by distinguished educators. Schools are deemed <i>in crisis</i> after 4 years (failure to meet qualifications in 1998) of staff reviews and not meeting goals. Parents can choose another public school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One-year cycle Schools set performance objectives in four areas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academic achievement Client involvement Educational programming Resource development Schools have flexibility within state guidelines in weighting objectives in each category, but academic achievement must be emphasized. 	<p>Rewards: Schools that attain 80 percent of total weighted performance objectives</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1994-95: 100 out of 3,000 schools applied; 45 approved; 19 awards. Bonuses of \$2,000 per certified staff member were awarded. 1995-96: 100 schools applied; 37 approved; 29 awarded. Bonuses of \$2,000 per certified staff member were awarded. Certified personnel determine by consensus how money is used. Money may be used for bonuses, sabbaticals, instructional equipment, staff development or appropriate expenditures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1994-95: \$2 million 1995-96: \$3.3 million 	
Kentucky						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools/Central Office Staff Part of <i>Kentucky Education Reform Act</i> that includes comprehensive accountability system that provides rewards for exceeding student growth expectations (1990 law). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools If schools don't meet goals but are improving, they must do an improvement plan on how to meet goals in two years. If growth goals are not met in four years, then sanctions are imposed. If a school falls below the baseline, then it's a school <i>in decline</i>. Schools <i>in decline</i> are helped by distinguished educators. Schools are deemed <i>in crisis</i> after 4 years (failure to meet qualifications in 1998) of staff reviews and not meeting goals. Parents can choose another public school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two-year growth cycle based on new state-developed assessments for 4th, 8th and 11/12th grades (all students including "at risk"). Now expanding to 5th and 7th. Baseline established in 1991-92 and redefined in 1992-93/1993-94. Reading, math, science, social studies, writing and non-cognitive index (attendance, retention, dropouts, transition to college or work). Total index includes arts and humanities and practical living/vocational studies (with less weight than other subjects). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Baseline score is determined for each school. Threshold for improvement over two years is 10 percent of difference in baseline and 100. Five categories <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Rewards</i>—1 point above threshold and 10 percent of students at novice rank are moved to next level <i>Successful</i>—meets threshold <i>Not meeting threshold</i>—must develop plans <i>In decline</i>—must develop plans and distinguished educators assigned; funding available for assistance <i>In crisis</i>—school fails to meet goal in two cycles (four years) (5 points below baseline in 1996) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1992-94: 485 out of 1,250 schools; 42 out of 176 central office staff; \$1,300-\$2,600 for 14,100 teachers and administrators paid in Feb. 1995 1994-96: 502 schools (41 percent of all schools) Voting majority of certified staff decides how money is spent; money can go to individuals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1992-94: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sanctions postponed; 136 schools <i>in decline</i> 1996: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nine schools designated <i>in crisis</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> \$26 million paid in 1995 for rewards; next rewards to be paid in 1997 \$6 million for distinguished educators 1997: estimated \$28 million available

Financial Rewards	Sanctions/Assistance	Criteria	Trigger for Rewards and/or Sanctions	How Many Received Financial Rewards	How Many Received Sanctions	Total Funding
Louisiana						
A comprehensive accountability program is under development						
Maryland						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools <i>Maryland School Performance Program</i> underway since 1989, includes School Performance Recognition Awards (1996 law) to recognize a school's progress toward meeting standards set by state board of education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools Schools identified for school reconstitution (changing one or more of school's administration, staff, organization or instructional programs) must develop a school improvement plan for the state superintendent of schools; if the state superintendent rejects the plan, the state board can order reconstitution. The district develops a proposal that the state board can accept or reject. If the proposal is rejected, the state board may contract with a third party to manage the school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two-year growth cycle Rewards: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plan is under development that includes test scores and attendance. Sanctions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> High School Standards—Results of grade 9 and 11 state functional tests in reading, math, writing and citizenship; also attendance and dropouts Middle School Standards—Functional tests and grade 8 tests; also attendance Elementary School Standards—Results of state tests in grades 3 and 5; also attendance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sanctions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Declining student achievement or not making adequate progress Expenditures will be monitored 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> First awards will be based on 1995 results. 1/3 of total money available is awarded on per-school basis with 2/3 of funds on a per-pupil basis 102 schools will receive awards of \$14,600 to \$51,400 School improvement team determines how awards are spent; no funds for staff bonuses or differential pay Initial awards to elementary and middle schools are based on new tests. New tests being developed for high schools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1995: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12 schools eligible for reconstitution 1996: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 37 schools eligible for reconstitution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rewards: 1996-97—\$2.75 million
Mississippi						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools and districts The <i>Mississippi Statewide Accreditation System</i> assigns accreditation levels to districts based on performance and process measures. Fiscal accountability is included. In extreme emergency situations, the state board of education has the authority to recommend to the Governor that a district be declared in a state of emergency and place it in conservatorship regardless of accreditation level. Mandatory abolishment of a district is required with reorganization at the discretion of the state board of education (1996 law). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One-year cycle Performance measures are used to assign levels to districts; ratings are on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high). There are 35 measures for levels 1, 2 and 3, and 38 for levels 4 and 5. Graduation rates High School Exit Exam ACT scores Statewide criterion-referenced subject area tests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Level 1: Probation. Districts must develop improvement plan approved by department of education. Technical assistance provided by the department Level 2: Warned. Subject to on-site evaluation and corrective action plans Level 3: Successful. Exempt from on-site evaluation Level 4: Exempt from on-site evaluation and certain standards Level 5: Excellent: Exempt from on-site evaluation and certain standards; special recognition. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1995-96: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> One district taken over due to fiscal problems March 1996: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Twenty-one districts placed on probation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1995-96: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> One district taken over due to fiscal problems March 1996: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Twenty-one districts placed on probation 		

Compiled by the Southern Regional Education Board, December 1996

Accountability Programs (cont'd)

Financial Rewards	Sanctions/Assistance	Criteria	Trigger for Rewards and/or Sanctions	How Many Received Financial Rewards	How Many Received Sanctions	Total Funding
North Carolina						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Schools ■ <i>School-based Management and Accountability Program</i> is a comprehensive program that focuses on school accountability with local flexibility for achieving results (1996 law). ■ The plan applies to K-8 schools in 1996-97 and high schools in 1997-98. ■ Rewards program for certified personnel and teacher assistants in schools that exceed expected growth. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Districts, schools ■ State board develops a plan to identify schools that fail to meet expected growth; parents are notified. ■ Assistance to schools through school assistance teams (low-performing or schools that want help). ■ Staff are evaluated twice a year by assistance teams. ■ Refusal by schools to cooperate could lead to replacement of principals and teachers. ■ If more than half of schools in a district are low performing and if the superintendent has not cooperated, then the state board of education can terminate the contract of superintendent and suspend the powers of local board of education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ One-year growth cycle ■ State-developed tests (20) in elementary through high schools ■ Low-performing schools ● Expected growth is not met ● More than one-half of students aren't at grade level ■ Scores are counted for students present more than one-half of total school days. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Student scores should show one year of progress for each year of school. ■ Rewards: Schools that exceed expected one-year gain by 10 percent or more will receive \$500 per teacher. ■ Assistance for low-performing schools ● Schools where students are performing below grade level or making no progress (growth and standards) ● Dismissal for staff in low-performing schools (teachers, supervisors and assistant principals) who receive two consecutive inadequate evaluations from assistance teams 	<p>No awards yet</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Awards are estimated to be \$500 to \$1,000 per certified staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ No sanctions yet. 	<p>Rewards: \$28 million in 1996-97</p>
Oklahoma						
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Districts, schools ■ <i>Oklahoma Educational Indicators Program</i> (1989) first established goals and called for tracking student progress. Subsequent laws clarified and expanded accountability and provided more flexibility. ■ Schools are identified as <i>low performing</i> or <i>high challenge</i> if achievement does not meet the state criteria. ■ Schools must develop plans that are approved. ■ Pilot project for school improvement (1996 law): if <i>high challenge</i> schools in large districts don't make progress, the district must reallocate funds to the schools and provide additional district funding. ■ After three years of low performance, sanctions include reassignment of faculty and financial penalty. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ State-approved norm-referenced test scores in grades 3 and 7 ■ 1996 law called for criteria to be expanded to possibly include graduation rates, student and teacher attendance, dropout rates, college entrance and test-taking rates. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>Low-performing</i> schools have one or two years of composite scores below the state's 25th percentile score. ■ <i>High-challenge</i> schools have three years of composite scores below the national 50th percentile and at or below the state 25th percentile. 		<p>1996:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 48 schools statewide identified as low performing or high challenge 	

Financial Rewards	Sanctions/Assistance	Criteria	Trigger for Rewards and/or Sanctions	How Many Received Financial Rewards	How Many Received Sanctions	Total Funding
South Carolina						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools, districts School Incentive Reward Program (1984 law) provides external review teams to evaluate schools and make recommendations to state superintendent of education. Districts that fall below criteria set by the state board of education are designated highest priority for technical assistance. A partnership is developed with districts in need for technical assistance. Beginning in 1995-96, the program emphasizes high expectations for all students. Districts receive incentive rewards if two-thirds of schools qualify. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Districts An assistance program for districts (1984 law) provides external review teams to evaluate schools and make recommendations to state superintendent of education. Districts that fall below criteria set by the state board of education are designated highest priority for technical assistance. A partnership is developed with districts in need for technical assistance. 	<p>Assistance Program:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment on statewide criterion and norm-referenced tests Dropout rates Graduation test scores Student attendance Teacher attendance <p>School Incentive Program:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> One-year growth or meet standard Achievement of each grade/subject using statewide results and gains compared to prior year performance. State and nationally-normed tests are used in grades 3-11 in reading, mathematics, language, writing and science (not all in every grade.) Ninety-six percent of students must be included. 	<p>Assistance Program:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> District must meet 18 of 27 achievement criteria and six of eight non-achievement criteria. Districts not meeting criteria are designated as districts in greatest need. <p>School awards:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> State percentile rank of 95 or higher State percentile rank of 90-94 with gain equal to or greater than state gain State percentile rank of 26-89 and gain equal to or greater than 75th state percentile rank State percentile rank of 6-25 and gain equal to or greater than 85th state percentile rank School's gain has been equal to or greater than 65th state percentile rank for three years. <p>District awards:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> District receives award if 2/3 of schools receive rewards. 	<p>1995-96:</p> <p>School rewards:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 308 out of 1020 schools received rewards. School councils decide how to spend funds. Funds may not be used for bonuses or pay to teachers and staff. Rewards ranged from \$2,800 to \$68,400 (\$26 per student). No qualifying school receives less than \$2,500. Schools receive 80 percent of per pupil allocation and can be increased to 100 percent with high student and teacher attendance and low dropout rates. <p>District rewards:</p> <p>\$2 per pupil</p>	<p>1996:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Three districts have been reviewed by external teams and designated as districts in greatest need. 	<p>1996:</p> <p>\$5 million for school incentive grants</p> <p>1996-97:</p> <p>\$5 million available for school incentive grants in November 1996.</p>
Tennessee						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools Part of <i>Tennessee Performance Goals and Standards</i>, an accountability system (1992 law), provides rewards for schools meeting performance goals and standards. Accountability system is used for districts, schools and teachers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Districts, schools Commissioner of education may place a system or school that fails to meet standards on probation. Department of education provides support for improvement during the first year; after two consecutive years on probation, the commissioner can recommend the superintendent and local board be removed from office and the staff reassigned. 	<p>Performance Goals in three-year cycle (growth/standards):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> School attendance Promotion rate Dropout rate Value-added assessment in grades 2-8 (moving to secondary math) using norm-referenced test Scores used if a student is in a classroom 150 of 180 days (special education excluded) 	<p>Rewards:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reach average attendance of 95 percent in grades K-6; 93 percent in grades 7-12 Promote 97 percent students in grades K-3 Dropout rate of 10 percent or less, grades 9-12 Meet value-added goals—gains greater than or equal to national norm gains <p>Probationary Status:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If district doesn't meet academic gains or earns less than 70 percent of performance points for above criteria 	<p>1994-95:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 113 schools out of 1,514 (40 high schools, 73 elementary/middle/junior high schools) \$4,424 awarded per school. The principal decides how money is spent; money can go to individuals. Teacher assistants receive one-half the amount certified staff receive. <p>1995-96:</p> <p>74 schools out of 1,562 received \$6,756 per school</p>	<p>No sanctions yet.</p>	<p>1994-95:</p> <p>\$500,000 for rewards</p> <p>1995-96:</p> <p>\$500,000 for rewards</p>

Accountability Programs (cont'd)

Financial Rewards	Sanctions/Assistance	Criteria	Trigger for Rewards and/or Sanctions	How Many Received Financial Rewards	How Many Received Sanctions	Total Funding
Texas						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The <i>Texas Accountability System</i> combines district accreditation status, campus ratings and recognition for high performance and improvement. High-performing schools are exempted from rules and regulations. Texas Successful Schools award system was part of larger accountability program that provided rewards (1993, 1995 laws; currently not funded). Principal Performance Incentives system will reward principals at campuses showing gains in test scores from 1994-95 to 1995-96 (1995 law). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Districts: Schools Eight indicators of performance are required by law; state board of education may adopt others. Campuses are subject to interventions including on-site visits. Districts are <i>academically unacceptable</i> or subject to takeover (sanctioned). Improvement plans are submitted and support is available. Schools in sanction status must notify the public of their status; a hearing before commissioner determines need for additional interventions. 	<p>Accountability Program</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> One-year cycle Testing for grades 3-8, and 10 Individual student groups within a school/district must meet standards or entire school/district does not meet its goal (excluding special education students). Texas Learning Index has been developed to show student growth year to year (reading and math). <p>Principal Incentive Program</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Criteria include value-added assessment (comparable improvement). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ratings for Schools in 1996 <i>Exemplary Recognized</i> <i>Academically acceptable</i> <i>Academically unacceptable/low-performing</i> Standard for <i>Academically unacceptable/low-performing</i> rating is 30 percent in 1996 and raised by 5 percent until 50 percent is reached in 2000. Standard for <i>Recognized</i> is 70 percent in 1996 and raised by 5 percent until 80 percent is reached. Attendance standard is 94 percent for grades 1-12; annual dropout rates above 6 percent place school/district in <i>Academically unacceptable/low-performing</i> category. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Principals will receive maximum awards of \$5000 (revision under consideration). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One district has been taken over. 	<p>1995-96:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Texas Successful Schools Award for 1995-96 (not funded) <p>1996-97:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Principal Incentive Program \$5 million for 1996-97
Virginia						
The Virginia Accountability Program includes school-by-school reports, but no rewards or sanctions.						

Financial Rewards	Sanctions/Assistance	Criteria	Trigger for Rewards and/or Sanctions	How Many Received Financial Rewards	How Many Received Sanctions	Total Funding
West Virginia						
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Districts, schools ■ School and district <i>Performance-Based Accreditation Program</i> (1992 law) ■ If a school falls below standards established by the state board of education, a school improvement plan is put in place. ■ Technical assistance is provided with a team of consultants for schools seriously impaired. ■ For schools not improving within one year, a student may transfer to another school if approved by receiving school. 	<p>One-year cycle</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Measures of school performance ● Statewide testing ● School attendance ● Dropout rate ● Graduation rate ● Pupil/teacher ratio and other measures are included but are weighted less than above measure. 	<p>Full accreditation is given to a school when standards are met.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Performance measures include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 50 percent of a school's students score at or above the 3rd quartile; 15 percent or less score within the 1st quartile or the percentage of students in the 1st quartile decreases ● Student attendance rate increases to 93 percent by year 2000-01 ● Dropout rate at or below 6 percent ● Graduation rate is at or above 90 percent by the year 2000 <p><i>Probationary accreditation</i> is given to a school when full accreditation is not met. Schools are expected to meet standards within one year.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Serious impairment occurs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● When performance is low (below 30th percentile on tests; attendance at or below 80 percent; student dropout rate at or above 9 percent ● Schools fall below criteria for fail: accreditation in all three areas: testing, attendance and dropout ● State board of education determines if extraordinary circumstances exist 			

Compiled by the Southern Regional Education Board, December 1996

How do sanctions and assistance programs work?

"What we ended up doing was to put the money into the classroom—not for salaries, but for equipment, technology and smaller class sizes. We were really looking at trying to help students in the classroom."

State legislator

"These accountability systems need improved data management systems in the state department of education."

State department of education staff

"When the reform act was put into place, the department (of education) was reorganized. One of the divisions, school improvement, is responsible for assistance to schools. This function got more funding, visibility and staffing."

State department of education staff

Nearly all SREB states have a sanction and assistance program. (The exceptions are Georgia, Louisiana and Virginia.) These programs rely on student achievement results to target troubled schools, although some states also consider a school system's financial stability. Most programs provide outside assistance for failing schools and districts—usually in the form of additional funds, expert help or both—and most include severe penalties for schools that do not improve.

Except for Arkansas and South Carolina, the sanction and assistance programs in SREB states focus on schools rather than districts—although districts usually share responsibility for improvement.

The process for sanctions is similar in most SREB states: state law or policy defines a "troubled," "impaired" or "declining" school; schools and districts must develop improvement plans, usually with the assistance of "expert" educators from outside the district or school; most often, state departments of education provide or coordinate

assistance. States grant schools and districts a year or more to improve before further sanctions are imposed.

The ultimate power to decide whether schools have met their improvement goals and what further sanctions, if any, are required may reside with the chief state school officer (Kentucky, Maryland and Texas) or the state education board (Alabama, Arkansas and North Carolina).

States are exercising considerable caution as they implement sanction programs. Both Kentucky and Tennessee have delayed sanctions for two years to determine if measures being used to identify schools are fair and reliable. Maryland started its program by identifying only a handful of schools that most would agree were at the lowest levels of student performance. Florida's accountability program was developed over several years before legislation passed in 1996 gave the state board of education authority to intervene in the operation of districts that failed to make adequate progress.

A new focus for state education departments

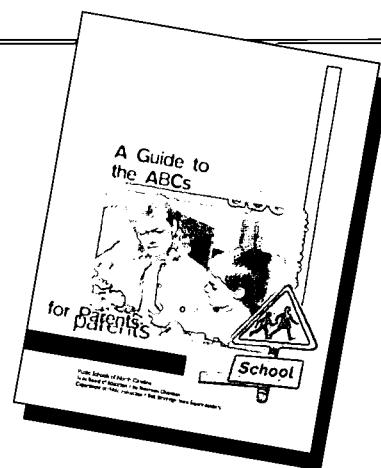
In response to changes in accountability systems, many state departments of education have reorganized to become more service oriented and less regulatory. In Florida, for example, the professional staff of the department of education became part of school assistance teams that work with schools. The Kentucky Department of Education coordinates the Distinguished Educator Program, which uses outstanding educators to provide direct assistance to schools "in decline." Distinguished educators work closely with school improvement teams to identify problems, use data and information to better understand issues, and help school staff focus their efforts on improving student learning.

"The idea of distinguished educators was that if you have a problem, you need to use the very best people to help . . . and pay them well," says one Kentucky legislator. The program can claim considerable initial success: all 53 schools "in decline" after the first accountability period improved with the help of distinguished educators. The number of schools eligible for special assistance (all schools not meeting goals) has increased in the most recent period, and funding is being sought to expand the number of distinguished educators.

Guides help everyone understand North Carolina's ABC Program

The North Carolina ABC Program is being developed around the three goals of strong accountability, an emphasis on basics and high standards, and providing local control for educators. After pilot projects of the new program in districts across the state, the Department of Public Instruction prepared a series of guides to help schools, parents and communities understand how the program will change relationships among school educators and the public.

Written in easy-to-understand language, separate booklets were prepared for parents, teachers, principals, superintendents, local school boards and central office staff. The guide for parents includes tips on how parents can work with schools for their children's success, an explanation of the ABC Program, and a list of contacts for parents to call in the state department of education for information on available reports and resources.



Sanctions differ from state to state

Most state accountability systems include more severe sanctions for schools that fail to improve after completing the state's intervention and assistance process. In some states, officials have the authority to fire school staff, move students to other schools (at the parents' discretion), or close schools. State sanctions may also include forcing districts to consolidate with other districts, appointing an outside person to manage the school district, and removing local boards of education from office.

A relatively small number of schools and districts have been targeted as "worst-performing" in most states—typically around 5 percent. Most district "takeovers" have been the result of serious financial—not academic—problems.

Early anecdotal evidence suggests that state sanctions, including the threat of firings and removals when schools fail to improve, are creating significant pressure. Even in states like Kentucky, where severe sanctions have been delayed, the eventual possibility of being taken over has been a motivator, according to legislators in the states.

Kentucky reports that most of the schools targeted as being "in decline" in 1994 appear to be making enough progress

to remove them from being in peril of the extreme sanctions, which include transferring students to other schools. In Tennessee, the state education commissioner does not anticipate exercising the authority to take over school districts, but this authority is being used to promote school improvements.

Some state leaders believe that the mere threat of sanctions is a more powerful motivator than payment of financial rewards. One state legislator put it this way, "We live in a society where people react more from the potential loss of their job than they do from making a little more money on their job."

Most leaders agree, however, that a balance between rewards, assistance and sanctions is necessary to build an accountability system that is effective and widely perceived by educators and the public as fair and worthy of support.

To date, the threat of sanctions seems to serve as an incentive to improve performance. Challenges to these sanctions and intervention systems will most likely occur when the teeth to these programs begin to bite—when schools are closed and teachers and principals no longer have jobs because of a school's failure to improve student learning.

What do the early studies of these programs show?

“Unfortunately the process in our state is seen more as a sanction-producing plan and less as an improvement package.”

State department of education staff

“We do have flaws in our accountability system, but there is also a perception of flaws that don’t exist.”

State legislator

Several states, including Kentucky, Florida and Tennessee, have compiled early evaluations about their education accountability programs.

The Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 (KERA) is one of the most closely studied accountability systems in the United States. KERA and its companion assessment program—the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS)—have been scrutinized by researchers in and out of the state.

After examining the work of these researchers, the University of Kentucky/University of Louisville Joint Center for Educational Policy concluded that KERA and KIRIS have spurred considerable changes in classroom instruction.² The Center reports that:

- The time that elementary students spend writing has doubled because of open-ended test questions.
- Mathematics and science classes are including more hands-on and group work activities, especially in classes where mathematics portfolios are used.
- Almost everyone (99 percent of the principals, 94 percent of the teachers and 89 percent of superintendents) thinks that

the new assessment system has changed ways teachers are teaching.

- The system for determining rewards and sanctions needs to be studied (especially the tests and assessments used) and “may be difficult to defend.”

A 1996 study by the Florida legislature’s Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability reviewed the implementation and impact of Florida’s *Blueprint 2000* reform. *Blueprint 2000* and its implementation are overseen by the Florida Commission on Education Reform and Accountability, created by legislation in 1991. A system of school improvement and accountability, the law calls for standards, assigns the department of education responsibility for assisting districts and schools, and returns the responsibility for student performance to local schools, teachers and parents through school advisory councils that develop school improvement plans.

The Florida study concluded that school improvement plans are becoming more focused over time, but one-half of the plans are unclear in describing “how schools will evaluate the impact of improvement initiatives.” The report says that *Blueprint 2000* has pro-

² *What Research Tells Us About Kentucky’s New Tests* by Peter Winograd and Joseph Petroko in *Kentucky Teacher*, May 1996.

vided schools a sense of direction and focus and has increased parental and community involvement. Also, the involvement of teachers in school improvement activities did not take time from teaching students. But the fact that many students move from one school to another has made it difficult to evaluate changes in student performance. Another problem is that school councils often do not include the required "stakeholders" (parents and business/community members) as members of the council and are often dominated by school employees. About one-third do not reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of the school population.

The study recommends incentives to ensure councils include all the interest groups required by law. It also urges more training for district and school staff in using data to develop improvement plans, and to help school board members understand their responsibility to ensure that councils reflect communities served by the board.

Surveys about *Blueprint 2000* revealed that teachers and principals are generally supportive of it. Seventy-one percent of the teachers and 88 percent of the principals surveyed believed that student performance has improved as a result of school actions implemented under *Blueprint 2000*. However, they are divided about whether these actions will have long-term impact.

Tennessee's Education Improvement Act of 1992 provided for ongoing evaluation by establishing an Office of Educational Accountability outside the department of education to monitor the implementation of reforms. The accountability program is based on how well schools are meeting performance goals: school attendance rates, promotion rates, dropout rates, and performance in the

Tennessee Value-added Assessment, which relies on the results of an annual, nationally-normed standardized test and uses a complex statistical formula to measure academic gain of students in second through eighth grades. For schools meeting goals, student achievement is expected to equal or exceed the national academic gain. Results are reported by districts, schools and teachers. The "value-added" approach to student achievement has been controversial, especially the individual teachers' results, since they have been released to principals to be used as part of the school improvement process.

An initial study commissioned by the office in 1995 raised questions about the state's approach to accountability and focused in particular on the value-added testing system. The report found that the complex system is not well understood by educators or the public and recommended a series of changes, including improving the quality of the data through technical changes in the tests. The report also identified problems in matching student test scores to individual teachers and said the system should be fine-tuned to ensure that reports "reflect student achievement gains only during the time the teacher is responsible for instruction." Two of the three researchers recommended changes in using the value-added system at the classroom teacher level; the third recommended that teacher evaluation be the responsibility of principals alone and that the value-added system not be used to report on teacher performance.

As a result, state leaders are discussing possible changes in Tennessee's value-added system and in its rewards and sanctions program.

Early lessons from new school accountability programs

Although state accountability programs that focus on student achievement have been in place for just a few years, some common issues are emerging.

1. Get tests and assessments right (or you won't get useful results.)

Since the new accountability programs rely on student achievement data to measure school success, the tests and assessments used are critical. Some states have experimented with student portfolios and group performance tests in an effort to gather different information about student achievement than multiple-choice tests generally provide. The challenges of grading these kinds of “authentic assessments” on a state-wide scale have been daunting—and some critics have also questioned whether the new assessments have overemphasized process at the expense of content.

On the other hand, states that continue to use state-developed tests with low standards developed in the 1980s or nationally-normed tests that have no standards (unless the “national average” is considered a standard) may not get results that reflect the current thinking about what students should know or that challenge teachers to emphasize the use of knowledge and skills as well as “fact gathering.” These states may adopt performance standards that are too low.

States that are expanding or redesigning their testing programs also face a public information issue. New assessment programs, however well designed, are unlikely to survive unless the public understands the purposes for the change and finds the information they provide understandable and useful in making judgments about school and student performance. In particular, states

must prepare educators, parents and the public when performance reporting shifts from “national average” comparisons on norm-referenced tests to descriptions of how well students have mastered high standards.

“Everyone assumed the schools in the suburban districts were better schools because they were producing more college-bound students. Some inner city schools are adding more value [student achievement progress] in one year than is being added in some suburban schools.”

State legislator

2. Balance action with planning and evaluation.

While it is necessary to get programs up and going and to begin to “see things happen” in a reasonable amount of time, too often unrealistic timelines are developed. When appropriate tests and assessments were not available or under development, some states started programs before they were prepared to begin by using existing tests or combinations of old and new. These kinds of decisions, while made in an attempt to ensure accountability, can create confusion and weaken support for reform among educators and the public. Comprehensive outside evaluations—like those done in Florida, Kentucky and Tennessee—can help by spotting problems early on in the accountability system and providing information policy makers need to correct them.

3. Make sure programs are easy to understand.

An underlying theme as the accountability programs become established is that the process for determining rewards or school

sanctions needs to be one that can easily be explained to the public, parents and educators. While there may be complex statistical analysis behind the system a state uses to measure student progress, it must be explained in terms that can be understood by both the public and educators. School-by-school report cards should be readily available to parents.

"Trying to change tests is a problem. When most students score above the national average, parents are excited; when the new tests show they don't do well, they are also excited, but in the opposite way."

State legislator

4. Provide help for educators to change.

While all of the sanctions and intervention programs call for assistance to troubled schools, it appears that most states are not providing enough resources for teachers, principals and state department of education staff to learn how to do their jobs in different ways. The threat of sanctions may help spark an *interest* in change, but without high-quality professional development over a sustained period of time, educators aren't likely to be able to change.

5. Create a comprehensive accountability program.

Only a third of the SREB states have taken a truly *comprehensive* approach to accountability in the 1990s—including standards and higher expectations for students; assessments based on the standards and expectations; rewards, assistance and sanctions; and school-by-school reporting to parents and the public. In these states, this comprehensive approach to accountability—and a willingness to fine-tune the system as experience dictates—increases the likelihood that the reforms enacted will survive and that they will result in permanent improvements in school performance.

What is important is that the public and educators understand how the whole system—standards, assessments, rewards and sanctions, assistance, and reporting—works in concert to improve student learning. Of course, the ultimate standard against which these programs must be held is whether they produce measurable, long-term gains in student achievement. With enough legislative commitment and public support, this decade's ambitious accountability efforts may gain the time and resources they need to prove their worth.

"We feel we've learned a lot in the four years we've been on this path and we feel we have some very valuable information that we need to utilize to improve what we are doing. We have made a good start at accountability, but we know we must continue our efforts to improve the system."

State legislator



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